SPLC Southern Poverty Law Center

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

The Intelligence Report is the SPLC's award-winning magazine. Subscribe here for a print copy.

# IDENTITY UNMASKED: MEET THE PROPRIETORS OF THE INTERNET'S LARGEST NEO-CONFEDERATE PROPAGANDA MACHINE

**2019 Fall Issue**

* * *

A small Facebook campaign predicated on keeping Confederate monuments in place has morphed into a group of more than 200 ardent, secretive separatists planning to make the South a separate nation.

And Hatewatch has learned the identities of some of the group's leaders and members.

Identity Dixie (ID), a neo-Confederate propaganda group, was instrumental in organizing the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Jason Kessler, who eventually joined Identity Dixie, secured the permit for the failed Aug. 12, 2017, event, a rally to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate commander Robert E. Lee. The group's growth is notable considering the tight controls for membership, a power struggle with its parent organization, The Right Stuff (TRS), and the bad press following the bloody and violent protests at Unite the Right.

The group's leadership holds diverse occupations. Two military veterans. A college student. An elementary school teacher. A government official. Hidden behind that cloak of normalcy lies a group that quickly has

supplanted the League of the South (LOS) to become the country's preeminent neo-Confederate hate organization.

## The leadership

Identity Dixie goes to great lengths to hide its membership to avoid identification by antifascists and to prevent suspensions and bans infrequently doled out by Facebook for terms-of-service violations.

Still, the identities of the group's leaders, some of their members and their social media have emerged. Here's a look at the group's leadership.

**Bret Keylon Lynn,**[1] 40, aka "Musonius Rufus" and "John Calhoun," a Marine veteran from Cookeville, Tennessee. Putnam County Commission meetings show Lynn was named a part-time judicial commissioner in 2015. A 2013 photograph of Lynn in the Cookeville *Herald-Citizen* listed his occupation as a teacher. He's one of the main hosts of "Rebel Yell," ID's flagship podcast and primary recruiting organ.

**Eric Christopher Field,**[2] aka "Mencken's Ghost" and "Will McLean," of Glen Allen, Virginia. Field is an Army veteran whose Facebook and LinkedIn pages tout a degree in strategic foresight from Regent University. Field is also a "Rebel Yell" host.

**Russell Berry,**[3] aka "Fulwar Skipwith" and "Fulton Skipworth," of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He graduated in 2015 with a degree from Louisiana State University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Berry joined Identity Dixie after he was interviewed on "Rebel Yell" about his involvement with a far-right Facebook group, and he has since risen through the ranks to ID's Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC), the group's chief leadership circle.

**Michael Cushman,**[4] aka "Michael O'Neil," of Aiken, South Carolina. He was a dues-paying member of the neo-Nazi National Alliance and a former League of the South state chairman. Cushman is also a member of the Knights of the Golden Circle.

**Lucas Gordon,**[5] aka "Silas Reynolds" and "John Brigand," of Ruther Glen, Virginia. Gordon maintains IdentityDixie.com and oversees the group's various social media profiles. He helped organize the group's second annual conference, the Asheville Forum.

**Tyler Thompson**[6] and **Patrick Bishop**[7] —who do not use aliases, — from Orlando, Florida. The two 25-year-olds host ID's "Good Morning Weimerica" podcast. They are members of the Silvern Circle and administer a Florida group auxiliary's Facebook.

**Phillip Lovelady,**[8] aka "Bedford Lee Dabney," of New Braunfels, Texas. He manages Blue Bonnet Patriots, the ID Texas chapter's Facebook outreach page.

**Michael Mott,**[9] aka "John Wang," of Hernando, Mississippi. Mott recently began planning the group's third conference.

**Brandal Thomas Payne,**[10] aka "Tommy Payne," of Germanton, North Carolina. In addition to belonging to ID, he is an officer in the Stokes County Militia, a paramilitary antigovernment group.

**William H. Coombs,**[11] aka "Hans Johannsen," of Memphis, Tennessee. He is a former member of the neo-Confederate League of the South (LOS), which coordinated with ID in planning the Unite the Right rally.

None of these men responded to *Intelligence Report* staff's repeated requests for comment about their membership.

*White nationalist demonstrators clash with anti-racist protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Aug. 12, 2017. (Steve Helber/AP Images)*

## Origins: Anger over the Confederate flag

Identity Dixie began as a Facebook page titled "Battle Flag the Fourth," which encouraged people to post images of the Confederate battle flag on the Fourth of July. That campaign began in the immediate aftermath of the June 2015 massacre at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. White supremacist Dylann Roof, who murdered nine African American churchgoers, had posed with the Confederate battle flag and compared the removal of Confederate monuments to "white genocide."

Following the church attack, officials in South Carolina removed the Confederate battle flag from the state house. In response, a TRS member using the alias "Ryan McMahon" created the Facebook page to encourage fans of the TRS podcast to blanket Facebook and other social media with images of the Confederate battle flag. That "Battle Flag the Fourth" page became the "Rebel Yell" page in 2016.

Bret Lynn, aka "Musonius Rufus," the main host of Identity Dixie's "Rebel Yell" podcast and the group's leader, shared its history in a secret Facebook group:

*"ID was conceived during the darkest days. Obama issued an executive order to ban the [Confederate battle flag]. When the Republican Governor of South*

*Carolina, the Sikh millionaire, and Methodist elder, Nikki Haley, declared it was time to remove the flag from the capitol grounds."*

At its outset, ID's core purpose was to generate and post pro-Confederate content. Lucas Gordon, aka "Silas Reynolds," recently encouraged members to create content that would "focus on the South, her history and culture, self-improvement for our people, strategies for secession and criticism of modernity and leftism."

Identity Dixie has maintained a presence on Facebook in spite of the social platform's promises to improve how it moderates hate speech and harassment. It takes advantage of Facebook's "secret group" feature, which allows individuals to create invitation-only groups that aren't visible to the general public. Facebook has received criticism for allowing groups espousing toxic rhetoric to stay on the platform by using the secret group feature.

The rhetoric within ID's secret Facebook groups is emblematic of its origins in the "alt-right." Members frequently use racist, bigoted and homophobic language to denigrate anyone who is not a white male Christian Southerner.

Identity Dixie launched its flagship podcast "Rebel Yell" in January 2016. The hosts of "Rebel Yell" have packed the guest list with names from across the reactionary right. Those guests usually discuss dominionist religious tenets — particularly Kinism, the belief that the Bible prohibits interracial marriage; distributism, which encourages the sharing of property rights; Reformed theology, or Calvinism; paleoconservatism, a radical strain of reactionary conservative politics that favors Christian culture; survivalism, which encourages the stockpiling of supplies and weapons in anticipation of a "race war"; and libertarianism, a right-wing belief in absolute individual sovereignty and complete rejection of any form of collective authority.

Previous "Rebel Yell" guests included:

- Michael Hill and Brad Griffin of the League of the South;
- Simon Roche of the South African Suidlanders;
- Jim Goad, author of "The Redneck Manifesto";
- Jason Kessler, ID member and Unite the Right rally organizer;
- Augustus Sol Invictus and Rick Tyler, a Holocaust denier and white nationalist politician;

- Tomislav Sunic, Croatian “new right” author;
- Lennart Svensson, Swedish reactionary author; and
- David Thibodeau, survivor of the Waco, Texas siege.

Although the organization is now known as Identity Dixie, that was not its original name. Having started as a Facebook page around the “Battle Flag the Fourth” campaign and after undergoing several iterations all tied to The Right Stuff in April 2016 the group began branding itself as the TRS Confederates (TRS-C). In Lynn’s history of the group, he stated that they “were happy to be the Southern subsidiarity [sic] of TRS” and that they coordinated with the “Reeeeefugees,” a close-knit group of TRS members who spearheaded online white nationalist trolling campaigns.

The TRS Confederates eagerly participated in the “Great Meme War” of the 2016 election, frequently “raiding normies,” or descending on generic social media interest pages en masse and spamming them with pro-Trump, white nationalist and neo-Confederate content. “Normies” are people who are generally not engaged in far-right politics.

As the TRS Confederates, the group began experimenting with street activism. When white nationalist Richard Spencer spoke at Texas A&M University on Dec. 6, 2016, Lucas “Luke” Daggett was there. Daggett is an Identity Dixie member and former Texas LOS chairman. Daggett and white nationalist William Fears were photographed taunting members of the TAMU student body before the event.

But about this time, the relationship between TRS and TRS-C started to sour and eventually collapse, leading to Identity Dixie’s rise.

*A group of Identity Dixie members march into Charlottesville, Virginia, on Aug. 12, 2017. (Youtube)*

## Power struggle

Although the "alt-right" was in its heyday, relations between TRS and TRS-Confederates began to take a turn shortly after the 2016 presidential election.

On Dec. 16, 2016, antifascist activists doxed American Vanguard (later Vanguard America) member and TRS member Cooper Ward, aka "Ghoul." Ward was a frequent "death panelist" on the TRS flagship podcast, "The Daily Shoah." A follow-up post by antifascists showed messages from Ward offering to abandon TRS in exchange for a retraction of his outing. The antifascists declined that deal.

Subsequent outings by antifascists revealed the identities of TRS hosts Van Bryan II, aka "Bulbasaur," and Jesse Dunstan, aka "Seventh Son" or "Sven." Although these outings were damaging for morale among the TRS community, the outing of Mike "Enoch" Peinovich, the main host of "The Daily Shoah," would have greater consequences.

On Jan. 18, 2017, "Rebel Yell" published an episode titled "Rebel Shoah: Fashy Struggle Session." The episode included Bret Lynn and Eric Field, using their handles "Musonius Rufus" and "Mencken's Ghost." They questioned Peinovich about the antifascist disclosure of his surname and his marriage to a Jewish woman.

During the "struggle session," Peinovich encouraged the hosts of "Rebel Yell" to distance their organization from his tarnished reputation. Three days later, on Jan. 21, 2017, the TRS Confederate group registered a new site domain, IdentityDixie.com.

In April, Identity Dixie removed TRS members from its Facebook group following a post by Lynn questioning why "TRS are so salty when it comes to Southern Nationalism." The Facebook thread amassed more than 700 comments and eventually led to a complete separation of the two groups amid accusations of intellectual property theft and counter-accusations of spying.

*William Fears (left) and Lucas Daggett, a member of TRS Confederates, experiment with public activism at Texas A&M University in December 2016. (Ralph Barrera/American Statesman)*

## How ID operates

Identity Dixie is primarily organized around a secret Facebook group. Members use pseudonymous "sock" accounts — digital alter egos — to share racist vitriol without compromising their true identities.

Identity Dixie has two subgroups for special members: Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC) and Knights of the Silvern Circle (KSC). The requirements for admission into these groups are unknown; however, the KGC appears to outrank the KSC.

In addition to its public and secret Facebook pages and groups, ID is trying to move closer toward the mainstream. The group organizes conferences, seeks to expand its media presence and plans to create two tax-exempt corporations, a 501(c)(3) media group and a 501(c)(8) legal defense group.

Identity Dixie hosted its first conference, the Atlanta Forum, on Jan. 28 2017, just one week after the group proclaimed its sovereignty from TRS. Speakers included white nationalist attorney Sam Dickson, League of the South public relations chief Brad Griffin, Traditionalist Worker Party head Matt Heimbach and Michael Cushman, formerly of the LOS. Antifascist activists in Marietta, Georgia, filmed a handful of attendees in the lobby of a local Hilton hotel but were unsuccessful in identifying the names of any members.

ID member Scott Terry, aka "Aaron Dale" and "ShotgunWildAtHeart," wrote a description of the event titled "Knights of the Right Stuff":

*"I was fortunate enough to be there — to be part of a small handful of the most notorious and passionate Southern nationalists left in Dixie. All the big names were present: Hunter Wallace, Michael Cushman, Musonius Rufus, and many others. That fortunate porch housed the virtual "who's who" of the South. If any of the old spirit of Dixie remains — if any one [sic] is left to sing the Song of the South — it will be the men on that porch."*

Following the forum, Identity Dixie instituted stricter vetting procedures to avoid the risk of outing members at in-person events. Potential members either are recruited online or receive references for inclusion from existing members. All members must create a sock account that must pass through the group's vetting groups, known as The Smokehouse and The Farm.

Members are required to write an article for the group's website before they are interviewed and granted access to ID's secret Facebook group.

Access to ID's main Facebook group comes with privileges such as attending in-person meetups and conferences. Members and "vetted allies" who do not produce propaganda for IdentityDixie.com are sequestered to another Facebook group called The Magnolia Society, named for the group's affinity for a common Southern tree.

In a demonstration of uncharacteristic cooperation, more than a half dozen normally territorial and competitive organizations formed an "intel" Facebook group just before Richard Spencer's speech at Auburn University on April 18, 2017. The group formed in response to its members' paranoia

about antifascist activity. The intel group consisted of Identity Dixie members and far-right activists from TRS, League of the South, Traditionalist Worker Party, Vanguard America and others. They scoured antifascist blogs and news updates and communicated any concerns to groups on the ground via secure messaging platforms. The groups also used that networking opportunity to pinch members from one another's rosters.

During the period of cooperation with rival groups, ID continued to work on establishing its brand and operational structure. In May 2017, Identity Dixie created and approved its official logo and symbol, consisting of a cartoon magnolia flower — designed by member "Chet Donnelly" — emblazoned over the "Southern Nationalist flag," designed by Michael Cushman. Members carried this flag at the Unite the Right rally.

*An altercation breaks out as a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee is removed from Lee Circle in New Orleans. The City Council voted to remove the monument and three other Confederate and white supremacist monuments. (Scott Threkeld/AP Images)*

The group previously had toyed with several designs and temporarily settled on a variant of the Confederate battle flag emblazoned with the "Black Sun," a popular white nationalist icon with ties to the Third Reich.

In that same month, Bret Lynn, aka "Musonius Rufus," posted a draft of "Identity Dixie's Mission, Rules, & Bylaws" for the group. Members

subsequently approved them.

In May 2017, several ID members participated in the "Battle of New Orleans." That event was held at Lee Circle to protest plans to remove Confederate monuments. Identity Dixie members "JC Hinson," Brandon Richey and "William Agee" were there. During the event, a brawl broke out between the white nationalists and a group of counterprotesters during a scuffle over the flag of Identity Dixie member Gunther Rice.

**School principal outed**

Before the Lee Circle event on May 7, 2017, Nicholas Dean Andrews, aka "Nicholas Dean," appeared on Augustus Invictus's "Battle of New Orleans" broadcast. Following the New Orleans event, Andrews, a New Orleans elementary school principal, joined Identity Dixie.

On May 13, Andrews, going by "Nick," also participated in a Red Ice TV panel broadcasting an event in Charlottesville hosted by Richard Spencer and Identity Evropa. "Nick" was joined by white nationalist James Edwards of "The Political Cesspool"; Eric Field, aka "Mencken's Ghost" of Identity Dixie; Tyler Thompson (soon to be an Identity Dixie podcast host but then operating under the banner of Right Source Media); and Michael Hill of the League of the South.

Andrews later was fired from his job when a local journalist publicized his involvement in the Lee Circle protest. Andrews ranted against his former employers, stating he would "exact a bloody revenge" on the media "if [he] had nothing to lose."

**ID gains members, focus after Unite the Right**

In the runup to the August 2017 Charlottesville event, "Rebel Yell" hosted future ID member Jason Kessler several times on its podcast. Kessler, who held the permit for the event, was considered a VIP by rally participants and therefore a probable target of antifascists. Consequently, several Identity Dixie members volunteered to serve as a personal security detail for Kessler.

"Rebel Yell" added an audio advertisement for the event as a bumper in episodes leading up to the Aug. 12 rally.

Identity Dixie members on the ground for Unite the Right were instructed to dress in khaki pants and blue golf shirts.

ID's uniform and distinctive black-and-white flags bearing its magnolia logo increased its visibility in a column of white nationalists marching into Emancipation Park in Charlottesville.

Lucas Gordon, aka "Silas Reynolds," exchanged pleasantries with Brad Griffin inside of Emancipation Park while Griffin livestreamed the event.

But the governor of Virginia declared a state of emergency and canceled the Unite the Right rally before it started. Members of Identity Dixie and other alt-right groups marched from Emancipation Park to nearby McIntire Park, exchanging blows with counterprotesters the whole way. By the day's end, one counterprotester was dead and dozens of others were injured. ID members used the group's forum to laud participation in the event, to denigrate counterprotesters and to coordinate a response to the coming onslaught of legal scrutiny and media attention.

Identity Dixie emerged from Unite the Right relatively unscathed, with none of its members caught, outed by antifascists or arrested in the aftermath. However, antifascists photographed several participating in brawls during the day's events. Lynn, aka "Musonius Rufus," would later downplay the group's involvement in Unite the Right, going as far as saying that the group didn't "exist legal," in spite of having drafted bylaws and a membership list.

Lynn, under his pseudonym, authored a piece titled "Imagine," which blamed the rally's disastrous outcome and the death of counterprotester Heather Heyer on city officials and other counterprotesters. The piece is a sterling example of alt-right apologia that began in earnest immediately after the event. The League of the South republished "Imagine" in its quarterly tabloid, *The Free Magnolia*.

Unite the Right spurred ID to abandon public activism explicitly, although some members still favored the tactic and continued to produce propaganda for subsequent public rallies.

Where Unite the Right proved disastrous for several prominent alt-right groups such as the Traditionalist Worker Party, League of the South, Identity Evropa, Vanguard America and others, Identity Dixie was able to make headway in its aftermath. Lynn, operating as "Musonius Rufus," brokered truces between feuding groups and attempted to rehabilitate spurned movement figures, much as the Fashy Struggle Session paved the way for Mike Peinovich to stay at the helm of TRS.

*Jason Kessler, a former Identity Dixie member, waits for protesters to quiet down before beginning a news conference in front of City Hall in Charlottesville, Virginia, the day after "Unite the Right." (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)*

Jason Kessler, the chief Unite the Right organizer, remained with Identity Dixie after the rally and appeared several times on "Rebel Yell." During his first appearance, he disputed the far right's conviction that he was to blame for the events of Unite the Right, and later returned to garner support for his follow-up rally.

Elliot Kline, aka "Eli Mosely," the former head of Identity Evropa, was added to the secret ID Facebook group The Farm after a *New York Times* piece revealed that he had lied about his service record. Kline eventually quit the group.

Identity Dixie continued to gain new members, including former members of the League of the South. In August 2018, Robert Graf "R.G." Miller emailed Hatewatch's tip line stating that he was "no longer chairman of the Arkansas League of the South." While Miller had indeed stepped down from his role in the League, he neglected to mention his participation in Identity Dixie in his email.

"William Agee," a former League of the South member, also participates actively in Identity Dixie and appears to have become involved with leadership.

ID has drawn converts from outside the neo-Confederate movement, including Brandal Payne, aka "Tommy Payne," and Phillip Lovelady, aka "Bedford Lee Dabney," who are involved in the militia movement and the Texas Nationalist Movement, respectively.

Identity Dixie also strengthened its vetting process after Unite the Right. It developed a "Listeners Group" Facebook page to screen prospective members. Lucas Gordon and leadership made this change after an abortive attempt to onboard longtime neo-Confederate movement malcontent Tim Manning. Manning was blackballed from ID and the broader alt-right in summer 2017 after a news outlet used his posts on The Daily Stormer under the handle "SCNazi" to reveal that the far right was scheduling lodging for the Unite the Right event using Airbnb.

*Elliot Kline, aka "Eli Mosely," the former head of Identity Evropa, was added to "The Farm" of Identity Dixie. "The Farm" vetted people for membership in Identity Dixie. (Eze Amos)*

## The next chapter: Moving to the mainstream

Identity Dixie has added a slate of podcasts to its site, including "The Paranormies," hosted in part by former TRS member Ian Weber, aka "Zev Hund," who sided with ID in its split with TRS. Tyler Thompson and Patrick Bishop have hosted a slew of podcasts for Identity Dixie, most recently settling on the banner "Good Morning Weimerica," which held extensive interviews with Brandal Payne, under the name "Tommy Payne,"

and another Forsyth County-area militia member, Brandon D. Hedrick, aka "Buddy."

Identity Dixie also has expanded beyond its original Facebook page and runs a small constellation of pages designed to appeal to conservatives. KSC member Michael Mott of Mississippi runs the Mississippi Grays page. Old Dominion Cavaliers was formerly run by Identity Evropa/Identity Dixie dual member Michael David Morsette.

When Hatewatch contacted Morsette about his membership in Identity Dixie, he replied with an email stating: "I am not a member and request you not publish false information. Thank you." He did not respond to the query, "Were you ever a member of Identity Dixie?"

The Blue Bonnet Patriots page is run by Phillip Lovelady, aka "Bedford Lee Dabney," and Matt "Paddy" Williams, from greater San Antonio, Texas. This page has garnered more than 1,000 Facebook "likes."

The Palm Tree Populists page is administered by KSC members Tyler Thompson and Patrick Bishop of Orlando, Florida. Jim O'Brien, a former member of the Florida League of the South, syndicates his blog and Facebook page "Bacon, Books & Bullets" on the Identity Dixie website.

Identity Dixie has an active presence on social media platform Instagram, and several of its members have avoided bans on Twitter in spite of frequent race-baiting.

ID hosted its summer 2018 conference in Asheville, North Carolina, and is in the process of scheduling a follow-up conference for 2019.

The group designed a T-shirt, sold by Dixie Outfitters, a neo-Confederate retailer in South Carolina.

In the close of a post titled "St. Andrew Day Covenant," Lynn, aka "Musonius Rufus," outlined his plans for the future of Identity Dixie:

*We the members of Identity Dixie will form a covenant with the God of the Bible and with each other. The covenant shall take the form of a fraternal order. The purpose of this order is to gather the remnant of our nation, to provide for their common defence, and to hold wealth in common for the redemption of our kinsmen.*

Lynn, operating under his account "John Calhoun," detailed the mechanics of this covenant in a post titled "The Plan, First Look 20180818," which

described the two "halves" of Identity Dixie's organizational strategy, through the creation of two corporations which would "be legally separate for safety."

"The Order" would be a 501(c)(8) fraternal organization whose purpose is to fund legal defenses for members accused of crimes and to assist financially doxed members who lost employment.

"The Medium," a 501(c)(3) corporation, will oversee propaganda production and pay members as employees.

Religion is a central concern for Identity Dixie. Its membership claims to belong to an array of Christian denominations, including reformed variants of Primitive Baptists and Orthodox Presbyterians, traditional Catholics, British Israelites, Reformed Episcopalians and sedevacantists — who believe that there hasn't been a pope since 1958. These disparate and seemingly incompatible faith traditions coexist in Identity Dixie through a common embrace of Christian Dominionism, a right-wing political ideology that seeks to impose on part or all of the global political structure its interpretation of "God's law." Identity Dixie has distilled the concept of militant dominionism into its slogan: "Retake Everything."

In the long term, Identity Dixie hopes to fund the creation of intentional residential communities, complete with home schools and its much-desired Church of Dixie.

Identity Dixie's leadership cadre has arrived at this point in their pursuit of a separatist dominionist community by operating on the periphery of explicitly violent white nationalist groups and hiding its broader ambitions.

Having exploited lax social media policies and savvy networking within the broader far-right community, they have strengthened their numbers. What remains to be seen is whether their goals will survive the scrutiny that comes with exposure.

*Illustration by Rob Dobi*

* * *